

FilAm vets of WWII win benefits; Bush signs bill

By RICHARD SIMON

WASHINGTON - In 1997, Guillermo O. Rumingan, now 77, chained himself to the White House fence to protest what to him was a long-standing injustice: the absence of veterans' benefits for Filipinos like him who fought alongside Americans in World War II. He returned to the White House on Tuesday, this time to see President Bush sign a bill granting some of those benefits. "It's a good feeling," said Rumingan, an Arlington, Va., resident who has spent decades lobbying for the benefits and who wore an American-flag tie to the bill signing. "Because at long last, we are equal to our counterparts in the United States Army."

The bill signing was the climax of an emotional, decades-long struggle by the dwindling group of Filipino World War II veterans to obtain the same benefits as those who fought beside them.

The Filipino veterans - many of whom live in California and are now U.S. citizens - say that President Roosevelt pledged to give them full benefits for fighting under the U.S. flag. The promise was made in 1941, when the Philippines was a U.S. colony. Nearly 200,000 Filipinos served.

But in 1946, a year after the Japanese surrender, Congress passed a law reneging on the pledge. In 1990, Congress

granted the veterans citizenship rights, but they have continued to battle for veterans' benefits.

The veterans, many of them survivors of the infamous Bataan Death March and now in their 70s and 80s, have staged demonstrations over the years, including chaining themselves to a statue of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, their former commander, in 1997 in Los Angeles' MacArthur Park.

Their campaign received a boost because of Bush's desire to maintain strong ties with the Philippines, an important ally in the war on terrorism. The issue of benefits for the veterans was raised during Bush's October visit to the Philippines in talks with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

The measure signed Tuesday, part of a larger veterans' benefits package, extends full war-related disability pension and burial benefits to about 100 Filipino veterans and 400 soldiers' widows living in the United States. They previously received benefits at half the rate paid to U.S. veterans.

Bush signed a measure this month extending Veterans Affairs health benefits to an estimated 7,000 surviving Filipino World War II veterans living in the United States. The estimated cost of the measures is \$16 million a year.

Several Filipino veterans took advantage of the new law immediately, enrolling Tuesday at the VA Medical Center in Washington. Similar events to sign up newly eligible veterans for VA health care are planned in California next week.

The fight is far from over, however.

Cesar P. Patulot, son of a deceased Filipino World War II veteran and chairman and chief

executive of the Los Angeles-based FilAmVets Foundation, called the bills signed into law by Bush "another mini-step in the right direction . to appease these gallant heroes."

But Patulot said the Filipino veterans deserve all of the same benefits as U.S. veterans, and his group plans to stage rallies around the country in an effort to win full "equity" for Filipino veterans.

The veterans continue to push legislation that would grant a broader package of U.S. veterans' benefits, including full access to VA health care for the estimated 21,000 Filipino World War II veterans living in the Philippines. They also seek pensions for low-income veterans: up to \$800 a month for those living in the United States and \$100 a month for those in the Philippines.

Rep. Bob Filner (D-San Diego), who has sponsored legislation to grant the benefits to Filipino veterans and who was arrested in a 1997 demonstration outside the White House, said Tuesday after attending the signing: "This is an important step, but it's only the first step." But the broader benefits package faces a tougher time in Congress because of its cost, expected to be tens of millions of dollars.

A turning point in the veterans' struggle came in early 2001 when Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.), a supporter of the Filipino veterans' legislation, replaced the late Rep. Bob Stump (R-Ariz.) as chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. Stump had argued during a 1988 hearing: "While Filipino forces certainly aided the U.S. war effort, in the end they fought for their own soon-to-be-independent Philippine nation." **Los Angeles Times**